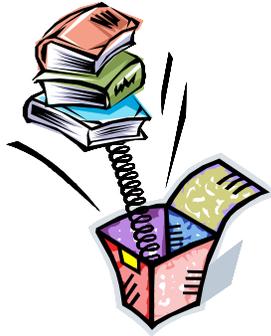




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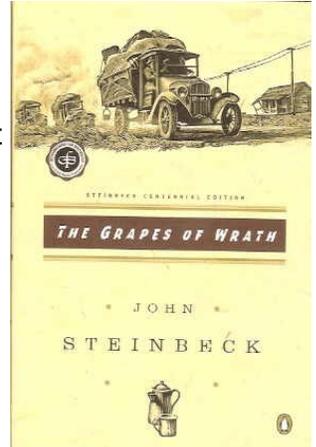


Book Club in a Box

THE GRAPES OF WRATH

About the Book

First published in 1939, Steinbeck's Pulitzer Prize-winning epic of the Great Depression chronicles the Dust Bowl migration of the 1930s and tells the story of one Oklahoma farm family, the Joads-driven from their homestead and forced to travel west to the promised land of California. Out of their trials and their repeated collisions against the hard realities of an America divided into Haves and Have-Nots evolves a drama that is intensely human yet majestic in its scale and moral vision, elemental yet plainspoken, tragic but ultimately stirring in its human dignity. A portrait of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless, of one man's fierce reaction to injustice, and of one woman's stoical strength, the novel captures the horrors of the Great Depression and probes into the very nature of equality and justice in America. *The Grapes of Wrath* summed up its era in the way that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* summed up the years of slavery before the Civil War. Sensitive to fascist and communist criticism, Steinbeck insisted that "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" be printed in its entirety in the first edition of the book, which takes its title from the first verse: "He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored." At once a naturalistic epic, captivity narrative, road novel, and transcendental gospel, Steinbeck's powerful landmark novel is perhaps the most American of American Classics.



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About the Author



In the course of his career, Steinbeck was held to be a sentimental romantic and a grim naturalist, a Communist and a fascist, a mere journalist and the spokesman of a generation. It is a tribute to the man that his work has inspired such varying views; clearly, he has made a mark on American consciousness. Steinbeck was the writer (he disliked the word "author") of at least one major masterpiece *The Grapes of Wrath* and several other excellent works: *Tortilla Flat*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Red Pony*, *In Dubious Battle*, and *Cannery Row*. All, except perhaps the last, are standard readings in high school and college English courses, as well as the subject of a large and growing body of critical analysis and opinion.

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Steinbeck's particular contribution to the American ethos was to make uniquely his own the portraits of migrant workers, the dispossessed, dirt farmers, and manual laborers. He provided authentic portraits of a class of people seldom seen in fiction before his day. His pictures of stoop laborers, strikes, and the Depression are today the standard images by which those things are known and imagined. *The Grapes of Wrath* has become not only an artistic creation but also an authentic view of many of the plagues of the 1930's. For most people, *The Grapes of Wrath* is what the Depression was, at least in the Western United States.

Perhaps the greatest general qualities of Steinbeck's work, qualities that help his works continue to interest, are life and immediacy. Steinbeck was enamored of life and gloried in it. He re-created it vividly in many of his works, with color and accuracy. He took great pains to research most of his works and believed he was thus attaining to some sort of truth, as well as reality. His generally nonteleological view of life led him to concentrate on the moment, on what *is*. At his best, mostly in works before World War II, he re-created authentic American types and characters and placed them in contexts that partook of the great myths and patterns of life and literature: the Bible, the Arthurian myths, the eternal cycles of nature. He had a strong faith in the natural processes of renewal and continuity and thus expanded his tales of the small and the insignificant to give them resonance and universality.

His accuracy and realism can perhaps best be seen in his care for the dialogue of his novels, even to the extent, in his later works, of reading into a tape recorder his own dialogue and playing it back for himself until he felt he had got it right, testing it constantly on the ear. It was probably this attention to authentic speech that made so many of his novels good candidates for stage and screen. None of his novels made bad films,

and some were outstanding, notably *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*. With only a few exceptions, his characters and events were equally genuine, dealing as they did with specifically American and specifically contemporary events.

Finally, Steinbeck was a patriot, but not of the flag-waving, jingoist persuasion. He displayed a deep feeling for the American people and the land both early and late in his career. He saw the values perhaps felt them would be more correct of family and social cohesion. He saw humans as parts of a whole, often against a background of the disintegration of larger social and economic units and systems. At roughly the same time as Sinclair Lewis was skewering the middle class of America, Steinbeck was giving his public an equally authentic view of a very different class of Americans, though with less satire and more affection.

Bergquist, Gordon, and Bergquist Gordon. "John Steinbeck." *Great Lives From History: The Twentieth Century* (2008): 1. *Biography Reference Center*. Web. 2 Aug. 2014.

Further Reading

If you liked *Grapes of Wrath*, you might like:

As I Lay Dying by William Faulkner

A Lesson Before Dying by Ernest J. Gaines

The Octopus: A Story of California by Frank Norris

Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe

The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl by Timothy Egan

Discussion Questions

1. Are we meant to conclude that Tom's killing of the deputy is justified?
2. What makes Casy believe that "maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of" (p. 24)?
3. Why does Steinbeck devote a chapter to the land turtle's progress on the highway?
4. Why does Pa yield his traditional position in the family to Ma?
5. What does Ma mean when she says, "Bearin' an' dyin' is two pieces of the same thing" (p. 210)?
6. As Tom leaves the family, he says, "I'll be ever'where—wherever you look" (p. 419). In what sense does he mean "everywhere"?
7. Why does Steinbeck interrupt the Joads' narrative with short chapters of commentary and description?
8. Why does Rose of Sharon smile as she feeds the starving man with milk intended for her baby?
9. What does Steinbeck mean when he writes, "In the souls of the people *The Grapes of Wrath* are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage" (p. 349)?
10. Why do different characters insist at different points in the book, "A fella got to eat" (p. 344, for example)?
11. Why does the book start with drought and end with floods?
12. Is the family intact at the end of the novel?
13. Why does Uncle John set the dead baby adrift rather than bury it?
14. What is the source of Ma's conviction that "we're the people—we go on" (p. 280)?
15. Does nature function as a force for either good or evil in this book?

For Further Reflection

16. As his land is destroyed, an anonymous tenant says, "We've got a bad thing made by men, and by God that's something we can change" (p. 38). Is Steinbeck suggesting that a just social order is possible?
17. When the narrator says "men ate what they had not raised, had no connection with the bread" (p. 36), the implication is that this break diminishes humanity. Can spirituality be maintained with increasing automation?
18. Casy tells Tom about a prisoner whose view of history is that "ever' time they's a little step fo'ward, she may slip back a little, but she never slips clear back.... They wasn't no waste" (p. 384). Do you agree with this view?